

**EXETER CITY COUNCIL**  
**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ECONOMY**  
**10 MARCH 2011**

**REPORT OF THE RAIL TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

**1 PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 At its meeting on 2 September 2010, Scrutiny Committee – Economy approved the terms of reference for a Task and Finish Group to study rail issues. The aims of the Group were to:-
- understand the importance of rail in serving Exeter now and in the future;
  - assess the need for improvements;
  - understand the obstacles to improvement, including the funding gaps;
  - consider solutions;
  - identify ways of working with other stakeholders to achieve those solutions.
- 1.2 The Group comprised Cllrs Mrs Brock (as Chair of Scrutiny Committee - Economy), Sutton (as Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Development and Transport), plus Cllrs Mrs Danks, Ruffle, Taghdissian and Wardle.
- 1.3 The Group has held a series of meetings, hearing from a number of witnesses associated with the rail industry, and this report sets out its conclusions.

**2 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 At its first meeting the Group received a brief explanation of the structure of the rail industry. This involves a number of organisations, with the following having the greatest influence over the local scene:-
- Network Rail, which owns and controls the track;
  - Train Operating Companies (TOCs), which are franchised by the Department for Transport to run the trains using rolling stock leased from Rolling Stock Leasing Companies (RoSCos).
- 2.2 The Group heard from representatives of Network Rail, and two of the three TOCs operating in the area namely First Great Western and South West Trains. It also heard from Devon County Council as Local Transport Authority, and the Avocet Line Rail Users' Group to understand the railways from the passengers' perspective.
- 2.3 By coincidence, Devon County Council had set up a Task Group to consider rail issues across Devon, operating to a timetable slightly in advance of our own. Their conclusions are summarised later in this report. During our own programme of meetings the ECC Group recognised the need to work with County colleagues as closely as possible to promote our desired outcomes, and an additional meeting was set up to discuss how this could be achieved, at which East Devon District Council was also represented. This has informed the overall conclusions in this report.
- 2.4 Member of the Group are very grateful to the witnesses who have given up their time to address the Task and Finish Group, in particular:-

- Devon County Council for their clearly expressed willingness to work together with ECC and others to improve the local rail system;
- those from the TOCs and Network Rail, who travelled significant distances to attend, and who provided a valuable insight into how the railways work;
- the Avocet Line Users' Group for setting out their challenging yet realistic vision for rail, and whose reference to the local rail network as "a priceless asset operating well below its potential" concisely sums up the situation which needs to be addressed.

### **3 THE EXETER RAIL SYSTEM**

3.1 The presentations by Devon County Council and the Avocet Line Rail Users' Group provided a useful insight into the issues affecting the rail network and services around Exeter. The context can be summarised as follows:-

- In the 1960s and 1970s, use of the railways was declining and infrastructure was reduced accordingly, eg. the Exmouth (Avocet) line was reduced to single track throughout, having previously been double track between Exmouth Junction (where it leaves the Waterloo line) and Topsham.
- More recently, the railways have experienced a period of sustained growth. Locally between 2001 and 2010, according to DCC, there has been passenger growth on the main line of 5% annually, and 10% on local services (around 25% on some lines). Digby and Sowton station opened in 1994 and now caters for over a quarter of a million passengers annually.
- Much of the new development being planned in and around Exeter has the potential to be served by rail:-
  - Cranbrook – developer contributions will enable delivery of the station at occupation of around the 1000<sup>th</sup> house;
  - Newcourt – a site has been safeguarded for a station;
  - Monkerton/Hill Barton – as well as the existing station at Pinhoe, there is potential for a station on Exmouth line;
  - Marsh Barton – has potential for a station on the main line.

3.2 Devon County Council's "Devon Metro" project (see Appendix 1) is examining the feasibility of stations in these locations, together with increased frequencies in order to attract travellers from road to rail. However, as well as the opportunities presented by Exeter's extensive rail network, there are significant challenges:-

- Plans to forward-fund Cranbrook station have been halted by the withdrawal of regional funding streams.
- On the Exmouth line, one new station (eg. Newcourt) could probably be achieved without affecting the timetable, especially with better performing trains. However, to achieve a second new station (eg. Monkerton/Hill Barton), new passing loops and signalling would be needed in order to maintain the current frequency, adding to the cost (a recent platform extension and passing loop at Penryn, Cornwall, cost around £8m).
- No infrastructure improvements south west of Bristol are proposed by Network Rail's current Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS), which envisaged annual growth of only 3.4%. Although it is possible for improvements to happen outside the RUS

(Penryn is an example of this), the document is regarded as definitive by Government and other key stakeholders.

- A second station on the Exmouth line would require more trains to run in order to maintain the current frequency. In addition, the Devon Metro concept envisages more frequent services to improve their attractiveness and address existing overcrowding. However, no additional trains are available nationally, and the supply of new rolling stock is tightly controlled by the Department for Transport.
- Difficulties in collecting fares on crowded trains leads to evasion, and underestimation of patronage.
- As well as a high cost, new stations have a long lead-in time.

3.3 However, the Group heard that the efforts of those involved in the industry had resulted in various incremental improvements in recent years, including:-

- Completion of a long passing loop at Axminster in December 2009 enabled the introduction of an hourly service between Exeter and Waterloo;
- Earlier Sunday morning services have been introduced on the Exmouth line;
- An hourly service now operates on the Barnstaple (Tarka) line, with financial support from DCC;
- A new early train from Paddington, arriving in Exeter before 09.30, commenced in December 2010;
- Reliability is currently high by historic standards, with all operators in this area exceeding 90%;
- Installation of ticket gates at Exeter Central, more revenue protection staff (six full time equivalents), and more ticket vending machines, is designed to reduce fare evasion.

## **4 THE FUTURE**

4.1 The most important outcome is to ensure that the new development proposed in and around Exeter in the coming years is served by rail. To achieve this, the network and services will need to be improved in ways which will also help to encourage use of trains by the existing population.

4.2 Specifically, the Proposed Submission Core Strategy provides for a substantial amount of development over the period 2006-2026, including:-

- around 4,800 dwellings and 21 hectares of employment land at Newcourt and Monkerton/Hill Barton;
- 12 hectares of employment land at Matford, and around 500 dwellings south of Alphington as part of a larger urban extension projecting into Teignbridge;
- development in the city centre including up to 30,000 sq metres of office floorspace and 40,000 sq metres net retail floorspace.

4.3 It is vital that stations are established at Newcourt, Monkerton/Hill Barton and Marsh Barton, as well as that already planned for Cranbrook, and that services are operated at a higher frequency with more modern rolling stock. This needs to happen early enough in the development programme to make rail a realistic alternative to the car for occupants of the new development.

4.4 Witnesses who have addressed the Group have identified some key opportunities for influencing the future of the rail system. Devon County Council's Task Group has helpfully outlined a timetable of key dates:-

- 2013 or 2016 – new Greater Western franchise to commence, depending on whether or not existing franchise is extended. The Government has indicated that this will be for at least 15 years. While longer franchises will provide more opportunity for TOCs to invest in rolling stock, stations, and other infrastructure, it is essential that the franchise specification is designed in a way that includes the Devon Metro improvements.
- 2016 – target date for electrification of Thames Valley lines, releasing a fleet of 57 diesel multiple units for use elsewhere. With no new orders for diesel trains, this represents a rare opportunity to update and upgrade the rolling stock in this region, although we will be in competition with other areas.
- 2016 – the date specified in Network Rail's Route Utilisation Strategy for introduction of half-hourly Paignton service.
- 2016-2018 – scheduled resignalling of Exeter and Plymouth areas.

4.5 It would therefore make a lot of sense to deliver the new stations and other infrastructure improvements in around 2016, to take advantage of the potential availability of cascaded rolling stock, and to enable passing loops to be included in the design of replacement signalling systems.

## **5 THE CHALLENGE**

5.1 While this seems logical, the difficulty and cost of making it happen must not be underestimated. This Council needs to play its part, in ensuring that land is safeguarded through the planning process, and that developer contributions are obtained, either through the section 106 system or Community Infrastructure Levy.

5.2 However, those actions on their own will not be enough. Central Government needs to be convinced that this is a plan which is both essential and viable. Only then is there any likelihood of the following pieces falling into place:-

- the Devon Metro vision being recognised in reviews of the relevant Route Utilisation Strategies, and included in the relevant franchise specifications and resignalling programmes;
- more trains, comprising more modern stock, being allocated to Devon, to allow for additional services, increased frequencies and greater capacity – this could be via a cascade as described in paragraph 4.4, although the national shortage of diesel multiple units means that there will be fierce competition for any stock which becomes available;
- funding to supplement developer contributions, whether to deliver stations earlier than would otherwise be the case, or to provide additional facilities.

5.3 This requires a strong unified message to be delivered by all public and private sector stakeholders in Exeter and the wider sub-region. DCC's Task Group has identified that there has never been an MP from the south west on the Transport Select Committee. Many of the south west's MPs are new and do not necessarily have an in-depth knowledge of rail issues, particularly the challenges faced by those trying to achieve enhancements, as explained to us by the various witnesses. However, many of those are in the parties comprising the Government and may collectively be able to influence ministers.

- 5.4 The need for organisations to join forces to lobby for improvements was supported by Julian Crow of First Great Western. With the demise of Regional Development Agencies, he stressed that it was important to have a coherent voice locally arguing for infrastructure and service levels. In the longer term, Local Enterprise Partnerships might have a role to play, but we must avoid a vacuum forming in the shorter term.

## **6 RECOMMENDATIONS OF DCC'S RAIL TASK GROUP**

- 6.1 DCC's Task Group has produced a series of recommendations which can be summarised as follows:-

- (i) The need for a unified south west voice on the national stage, beginning with a summit of rail decision makers from the south west, to form a consensus and action plan regarding the following:-
- lobbying to secure a new train fleet across the south west;
  - reconsideration of the Greater Western Route Utilisation Strategy;
  - how to promote rail freight;
  - a joint public transport card;
  - how to improve Network Rail to ensure it is fit for purpose.
- (ii) The need for more strategic meetings between Network Rail and DCC, based on the system which operates between the West of England Partnership (of local authorities in the Bristol area) and Network Rail.
- (iii) The need to seize every opportunity to secure increased rail services and train capacity in the south west, including by:-
- contributing to new Greater Western franchise specification (due 2013 or 2016);
  - working to receive trains displaced by any replacement rolling stock for the Cardiff – Portsmouth line, to supplement existing vehicles;
  - working to receive the trains displaced by Thames Valley electrification, as replacements for existing stock.

- 6.2 Our own Task and Finish Group supports those recommendations and has reached very similar conclusions from its own work.

- 6.3 City Council members have asked to be supplied at appropriate times with a brief summary sheet of points to be made, and to whom, in relation to the key issues identified in this report. These will be required at specific points in the future, such as when a new franchise is being drawn up, or a cascade of rolling stock is being considered. As a first step, a summary sheet has been prepared in relation to the national shortage of diesel trains, since that is a current problem, with the existing fleet being inadequate to cope with present demand, let alone the Devon Metro proposals. This summary sheet forms Appendix 2 to this report.

## **7 OTHER MATTERS**

- 7.1 The Group's attention was drawn to the fact that the Secretary of State has commissioned a study by Sir Roy McNulty into the value for money of the UK's rail industry as a whole. That and the economic situation are likely to influence the shape of Britain's railways in the future, but it is significant that considerable investment is being planned in rail in other parts of the country and we need to ensure that the south

west in general and the Exeter area in particular do not miss out. The Government would be wrong to regard our railways as underused rural lines, when the truth is that they are increasingly well used (and in some cases overcrowded) commuter and intercity routes.

- 7.2 Members have concerns about the level of some fares, particularly walk-on fares for longer distances. They appreciate the explanations given to them by the representatives of the TOCs as to the framework they inherited from British Rail, and the constraints imposed by regulation. They were encouraged to learn that a widespread reduction in fares on local lines succeeded in increasing patronage, as well as the steps being taken towards smart ticketing and multi-journey deals for less frequent travellers. However, they are concerned that train fares must be competitive to encourage people out of cars and ease congestion on the roads.
- 7.3 They are also encouraged by the increasing facilities for cycles at stations, and wish to see continued improvement in this regard. Cycling and rail appear to be modes of travel which fit together effectively to provide the door to door service which people need. They were interested to see some of the facilities which had been provided by South West Trains as part of their Bike and Ride bid, which could usefully be copied at local stations.
- 7.4 Members were also interested to learn of the customer information systems being introduced at stations and elsewhere, including the possibility of using real-time information feeds in shops and workplaces. The Council is working with Devon County Council to develop real-time information facilities based on the “monoliths” in the city centre.
- 7.5 Members were disappointed that the proposed Inter Modal Freight Terminal east of Exeter had not come to fruition, especially at a time when supermarkets were showing a willingness to use rail for transporting goods.

## **8 RECOMMENDED**

### **8.1 That**

- (a) Devon County Council's “Devon Metro” proposals be endorsed, and that City Council members and officers actively support the process of making them a reality;
- (b) the principle of working with Devon County Council and other public and private sector stakeholders to lobby for rail improvements be endorsed:-
  - (i) with prospective supporters to include Exeter businesses, Exeter Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the University of Exeter, Exeter Airport, TravelWatch South West, the local media, MPs and MEPs;
  - (ii) with prospective drivers of the process to include the Exeter and East Devon New Growth Point Steering Board, the Exeter and Heart of Devon Economic Partnership, and the emerging Local Enterprise Partnership;
  - (iii) with specific objectives being:-
    - the need for procurement of a new fleet of diesel multiple units, to address a national shortage and enable sufficient rolling stock to be allocated to the south west;
    - cascades of suitable rolling stock if opportunities arise;

- a review by Network Rail of the Great Western Route Utilisation Strategy to reflect the increase in passenger numbers in excess of predictions;
  - the inclusion of the Devon Metro improvements in new franchises, and in resignalling schemes;
- (c) all opportunities be taken to secure funding for Devon Metro, including financial contributions from developers (through section 106 agreements or the Community Infrastructure Levy) as well as the safeguarding of land;
- (d) the Projects and Business Manager provide members periodically with summary sheets in relation to key issues, in advance of the critical dates identified in this report.

Ross Hussey  
Projects and Business Manager  
on behalf of the Rail Task and Finish Group

## **ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT DIRECTORATE**

### **Local Government Act 1972 (as amended)**

#### **Background papers used in compiling this report:-**

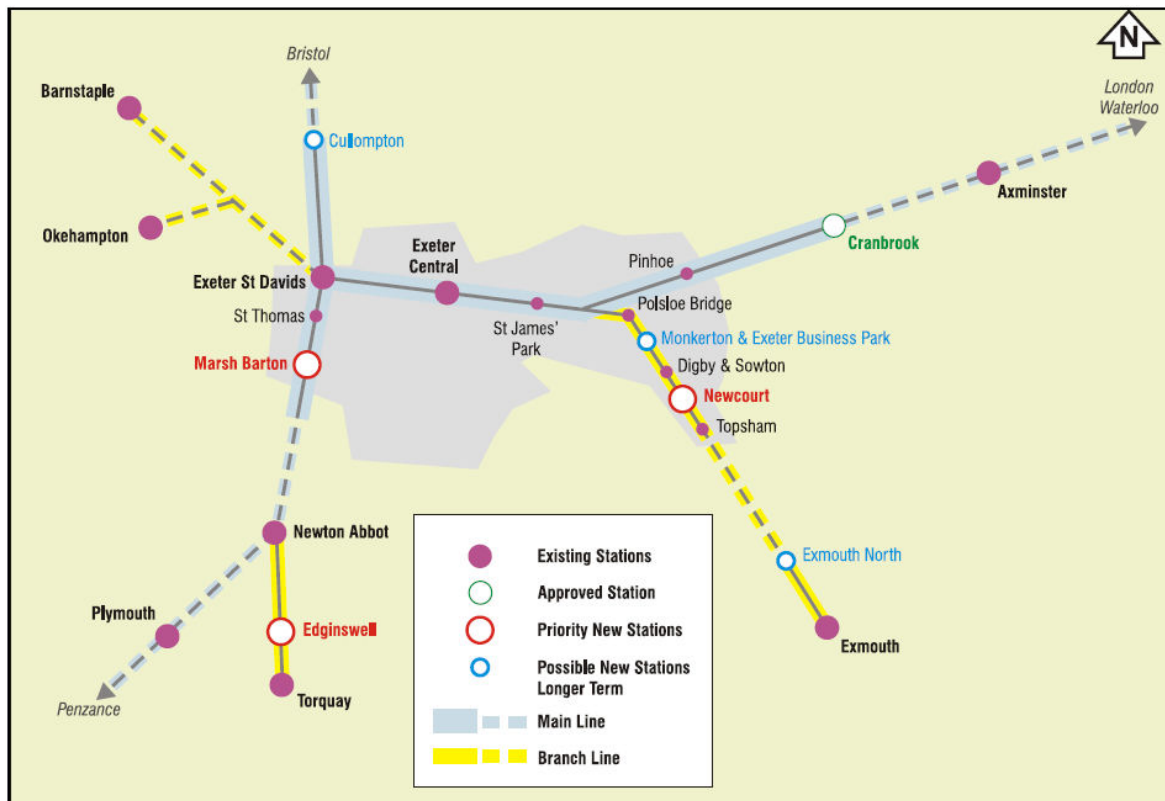
Devon County Council Scrutiny Task Group (Rail) – Report (January 2011)

Rail Value for Money Study interim report (Sir Roy McNulty for DfT, December 2010)

Great Western Route Utilisation Strategy (Network Rail, March 2010)

## Appendix 1

### Devon Metro proposals



#### Short term aims

- 4 car trains in the peaks
- New station on the Exmouth Line
- New station at Marsh Barton
- 30 minute local service frequency on the Paignton line
- Cranbrook station

#### Longer term aims

- 30 minute frequency to Cranbrook, Honiton and Axminster
- Further new stations on the Exmouth line
- 15 minute frequency on the Exmouth line
- 15 minute frequency on the Paignton line



## Appendix 2

### BRIEFING NOTE

#### BRITAIN NEEDS MORE DIESEL TRAINS FOR LOCAL SERVICES

##### Why?

The existing fleet is SUBSTANDARD – it includes around 140 “Pacers” which are bus bodies running on rails.

The existing fleet is OLD – the Pacers are 25 years old, and over 300 of the “Sprinters” are 20-25 years old.

There aren't ENOUGH of them – there is already overcrowding on peak services in and out of Exeter (and elsewhere), and growth in passenger numbers is exceeding 10% a year. Even after current cascades have been completed, there will be no increase in the number of rail vehicles in South West England.

##### What about electrification?

Electrification of the Thames Valley network will free up some suitable trains, BUT:-

- This won't happen until 2016 at the earliest.
- Only around 57 “Turbo” trains will be released.
- They will be around 25 years old by then (although the lower leasing costs associated with this would be an advantage for our local lines).
- This area will be in competition with other parts of the UK for this stock.

##### Is anything else on order?

Not after the trains currently being delivered to London Midland, which are enabling the current cascades. Future orders are for electric trains. The South West looks set to get nothing until 2016 at the earliest.

##### What is needed?

Britain needs a fleet of “go anywhere” diesel trains for local lines in areas without electrification. The need for these is particularly urgent in Exeter and the wider South West. A new fleet could provide adequate capacity now, cater for growth, and enable withdrawal of the oldest trains.

##### Who needs to know this?

Ministers at the Department for Transport, because they control the supply of rolling stock.